



A Matter of Justice
Important Events in the Life of John Freeman

1807

John Freeman, born free [?] in Prince Edward County, Virginia.

(See: "Biography of John Freeman in William Cutler, Cutler's History of the State of Kansas (Chicago: A. T. Andreas, 1883)

(Note: Freeman was still alive when Cutler wrote his biography).

1831

Freeman left Virginia and arrived in Monroe, Walton County, Georgia. He registered at the courthouse and received a free certificate from John B. Lucas. Creed Jennings became Freeman's guardian, presumably guarding Freeman's finances.

(Ibid.; Charles Money, "The Fugitive Slave Law and Indiana," Indiana Magazine of History 17: (June & September, 1921), 159-198, 257-297; Henry Ward Beecher, "A Minister Hunting His Slave," New York Independent, reprinted in The Liberator (Boston) 29 July 1853).

c. 1836

Freeman accompanied Lucas, then a colonel in the U.S. Army, to Florida during the 2nd Seminole War.

(Cutler, Cutler's History of the State of Kansas).

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1844

Freeman left Georgia for Indianapolis, Indiana. He reportedly deposited \$600.00 in a local bank. This was required by the provisions of an act that required blacks immigrating to the state post a \$500.00 bond for “good behavior,” and for not becoming dependent upon the state.

([Beecher], “A Minister Hunting His Slave”; 1831 Indiana Revised Laws ch LXVI)

Henry Ward Beecher, a nationally prominent Presbyterian minister with strong anti-slavery views, was the pastor at 2nd Presbyterian Church in Indianapolis. During Beecher’s pastorate, Freeman became a sexton at 2nd Presbyterian Church; the church was located on the Circle in downtown Indianapolis at the time. John Ketcham, Lucien Barbour, Henry and John Coburn, Lycurgus Bushwhacker and Samuel Merrill are among the members of 2nd Presbyterian; several these men became a part of Freeman’s defense team.

(Ibid.)

By the fall of the 1844 Freeman began purchasing property in and around Indianapolis. He continued to do so until at least 1851.

(See: G-I-Date 1824-1930 Land Deed Index General Index to Deed Records of 1823-1930 Land in Marion County; Town Lot Record Book 4, 95-96.)

Between 1844 and 1849 Freeman married Letitia Drape; Letitia had worked in Beecher’s household. At some point he purchased property on North Meridian Street between Second and Third Street (now Tenth and Eleventh Streets), which was at that time outside the city limits. He built a home made primarily of logs and raised a garden for foodstuff for his family and his restaurant on Meridian Street between Washington Street and the Circle.

[Beecher], “A Minister Hunting His Slave.”

c. 1846 or 1847

Freeman joined Second Baptist Church. He became a deacon and a trustee. He was likely a charter member.

(Ibid.; Moses Broyles, The History of the Second Baptist Church of Indianapolis, with the Administration of All Her Pastors, Her Sunday School Church Property, Etc. (Indianapolis: Printing and Publishing House, 1876), 27, 34.)

1850

Freeman and the members of his household were enumerated on the 1850 federal census for Marion County. His household included Letitia, two minor girls, Lucy Wright and Catherine Davis, a ninety-year old woman who may have been his wife's relative.

1853

June 20th (approximately) Pleasant Ellington, of Platte County, Missouri arrived in Indianapolis. He went to the home of James and Lorenzo Githens, both of whom worked for a railroad company.

(Money, "The Fugitive Slave Law in Indiana.")

June 20th (approximately) Deputy United States Marshall Stopp [Stapp?] visited the Githens house and apparently consulted with Ellington.

Stopp told Freeman that former mayor and United States Commissioner William Sullivan wanted to speak to him. In this way, he tricked Freeman into accompanying him to Sullivan's court.

When Freeman entered Sullivan's court, Ellington, and presumably the Githens, accused him of being Ellington's runaway slave Sam. Attorney, and 2nd Presbyterian member John Ketcham learned of Freeman's situation and offered his services to Freeman. Ellington accused Freeman of being his fugitive slave Sam, although he was six inches shorter than Sam and of a different complexion.

The provisions of the (federal) Fugitive Slave law of 1850 were sufficiently vague that any black could, in theory, be accused of being a runaway.

(Ibid.)

Although Freeman had papers and other documentation identifying him as a free person of color, he was jailed. Judge Stephen Mayor of the Marion County Circuit Court deferred to Commissioner Sullivan's court concerning this case because Freeman was held under a federal, not state, law.

Ellington asked that Freeman's clothes be removed. Stopp refused and sent for United States Marshall and former United States Representative, John Robinson of Rushville.

[Beecher], "A Minister Hunting His Slave:" Calvin Fletcher, Diary of Calvin Fletcher ed. Gayle Thornbrough and Dorothy Riker (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1977), 81,84-85

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On June 22nd or 23rd, Marshall John Robinson arrived. Sometime afterward, he and Ellington decided to take Freeman to Madison, Indiana and jail him there. This was likely a ruse to spirit Freeman away into slavery.

([Beecher], wrote in "A Minister Hunting His Slave," "Under a pretense that he feared a rescue, the Marshall was about to remove Freeman to Madison jail on the Ohio.")

Calvin Fletcher, a lawyer and president of the Indianapolis branch of the State Bank, landowner and antislavery supporter, heard of Freeman's arrest and imprisonment. Fletcher offered Robinson bail in gold to assure that Freeman would not escape. Robinson refused.

Funds were offered to Ellington to buy Freeman. Ellington would accept no amount. About one hundred citizens gathered at the jail including Isaac Blackford, former judge of the Indiana Supreme Court. Robinson forcefully removed Freeman's clothes so that Ellington could inspect him. About this time, Ellington's son said that Freeman was not his father's slave. The Hoosier community contributed to the 'Freeman fund.' Calvin Fletcher collected money.

30 July

William S. Hubbard, clerk of the State Bank, received three pieces of Freeman's property for \$1.00 that was supposed to be held in trust to help pay the costs associated with his defense. This deed was recorded the day before, on **29 July**.

James Ketcham, acting as a notary, secured Letitia Freeman's forfeiture of her rights to the properties on July 30th.

After this, Freeman sent for Leroy Patillo and Creed Jennings of Georgia who could bear witness to his free status. He also sent Lucien Barbour and John Coburn (two of his attorneys) to Ohio and Canada to look for the real Sam. They find Sam in Canada. Barbour and Coburn took depositions that were submitted to the court.

C. August 1853

Patillo came to Indianapolis; Jennings followed later. Lucas, who has issued Freeman his free certificate, had since moved to Alabama and died. However, the Governor of Alabama, Henry W. Collier, offered to come testify in Freeman's behalf that he was indeed a free man.

(Charles Money, "Fugitive Slave Law and Indiana," wrote: "Meesssrs.. Patillo and Jennings had come previously, and Gov. Henry Collier of Alabama would have come had he been telegraphed." (192)

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24 August

Based on the significant evidence and testimony that Freeman was a free person of color, Ellington's case was dismissed. Freeman, however, suffered great financial hardship as a result of his incarceration. A trust allowed him to keep one lot on which he and his family lived. Freeman maintained his restaurant on Meridian Street

Between the 24th and 28th of August Ellington left Indianapolis, presumably returning to St. Louis, Missouri.

29 August

The local black community led by the Prince Hall Masons hosted a celebration welcoming John Freeman "back into the bosom of liberty."

(Indiana Free Democrat 29 August 1853).

Fall 1853

In an effort to regain some of his financial losses, Freeman decides to sue Ellington. Freeman filed a suit in the Marion Circuit Court claiming \$10,000 damages against Ellington. This case is Freeman v. Ellington. The Marion Circuit court awards Freeman \$2,000 in damages and the court costs for his inconvenience and Ellington's act of fraud. Unfortunately, Freeman is never able to collect this money.

Freeman's attorneys, Ketcham, Barbour and Coburn agree to accept \$3,000 for their services.

Locomotive ((Indianapolis) 3 September 1853; Ibid. 24 September 1853. Reporter wrote, "Freeman's counsel agreed to receive \$3,000.)

February 1854

A local paper described Freeman as destitute.

December 1855

Since Freeman failed to recover any money from Ellington he decided to file a new suit against Marshall Robinson charging him with extortion and assault. This case was also filed in the Marion Circuit Court. The Marion court ruled that it did not have jurisdiction in the case. The case, Freeman v. Robinson, should be conducted in Rush County where Marshall Robinson was a resident.

Freeman appealed this case; Freeman v. Robinson, from the Marion Circuit Court to the Indiana Supreme Court.

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The Indiana State Supreme Court heard Freeman's appeal of the alleged assault and extortion by Marshall Robinson. The Court concluded that Robinson's actions of publicly stripping Freeman of his clothes, and charging him \$3.00 per day for his incarceration, constituted assault and extortion, that Freeman did indeed suffer personal injury. However, the Court goes on to say that the case was filed in the wrong court. The Court affirmed the Circuit court's ruling. The opinion was filed 21 December 1855. There is no record that Freeman ever re-filed the case in Rush County, where Robinson lived.

In an article dated 9 February 1854 a reporter wrote: "The President's approval of his {Robinson's} conduct, proves nothing but that Mr. Robinson has made good use of the opportunity he had of appearing in double character of witness and advocate."

(Chapman Chanticleer).

1855-1860

Freeman worked as a painter, whitewasher and at various other skilled or semi-skilled jobs in the Indianapolis area.

1861-1863

Freeman still lived on Meridian Street in Indianapolis and at some point opened and operated an oyster bar.

While the Civil War raged, Freeman and other deacons and trustees at Second Baptist have a very serious ideological dispute. This may be one of the reasons why Freeman chose to leave Indianapolis at this point.

By 1863, the tide of the war was beginning to turn. The Union army won the Battle of Antietam. Following the Emancipation Proclamation blacks enlisted under the Union flag; and more manpower meant a greater opportunity for success. It does not appear that Freeman would have left over concerns about the North losing the war.

1863

March: John Robinson dies.

C. 1864

By 1864, Hubbard and Freeman sold the property on Meridian Street. Hubbard subsequently moved from 9 Circle Street to the Freeman property where he ultimately made a fortune in real estate along Meridian Street.

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Freeman moved to Canada in the fall of 1863 or the spring of 1864. Harriet Freeman, John and Letitia Freeman's daughter recollected that they migrated to Canada after Lincoln's assassination.

(See the Topeka [Kansas] Daily Capital 8 May 1910.

1869

Pleasant Ellington dies.

1870

Freeman moved his family to Topeka, Kansas. He bought property and contributed \$1,200 to built the Fourth Baptist Church of Topeka.

(Cutler, History of the State of Kansas)

1902

October 2nd: John Freeman died.